

Eleonora Goi

In conversation with David Malouf

In the year in which the world celebrates the 80th anniversary of David Malouf's birth it seemed particularly important to acknowledge the major contribution this author has made to Australian and international literature. The following interview dates back to April 2013, when David Malouf himself kindly invited me to his house in Sydney to discuss some his novels and the topics I was researching for my doctoral dissertation.

The deep concern the author shows in describing the often difficult relationship between Man and Nature, his awareness that Art and Literature can help us get in touch with physical space as well as with some forgotten and mysterious part of ourselves, his ability to portray visions and metamorphoses that allow us to experience places where “boundaries of place and language dissolve” (Malouf 1991: 26), make Malouf's body of work the perfect paradigm of eco-sustainable writing.

Unsurprisingly, then, Malouf's ‘ecosophy’ and his characters' search for new ways of interiorising the Australian landscape, be it by naming its animals and plants or by capturing their image on film or on canvas, has been one of the topics mentioned more often during the interview, marking it, in my opinion, not only as a tribute to the literary greatness of this writer on the occasion of his eightieth birthday, but also as an interesting contribution to the present issue of *Le Simplegadi*.

Eleonora Goi In your novels, I dare say in all your works, the characters' need to recount and narrate is always very strong, sometimes even to the point of lying. Quoting from *Ransom*, “This old fellow, like most storytellers, is a stealer of other men's tales, of other men's lives” (Malouf 2009: 128). Is this a means of giving your

characters more depth, rendering them multi-faceted, or is it the act of storytelling itself you are so interested in?

David Malouf I think I am probably interested in storytelling itself, but I'm also interested in why people feel the need to tell the story. My first novel, *Johnno* (1975), for example, is about somebody who needs to tell the story because he has always meant to write about that person, but things have changed now because the person has maybe committed suicide and involved him as being partly to blame for it. This means that his need to tell the story now is not just because it is a good story and this is a good character, but because he feels responsible for something within the story, either having done something or not having done something, not having sufficiently understood him or not having sufficiently loved him - if that is what he wanted - or having misrepresented him in some way. We all like to tell stories, some people more than others, and of course a writer is someone who likes to tell a story, but then the story may be imposed on you in some kind of way.

EG So you feel compelled to tell it?

DM Yes, and at that point the fact that you are compelled to tell the story means that you are no longer free. One of the things you are trying to discover by telling the story is why you feel compelled to tell it.

EG According to the philosopher Raimon Panikkar, nowadays words are stripped of their dialogical power and considered 'terms', so that culture and education are being reduced to a mere transferring of notions (Panikkar 2009). Do you feel there is the need to embrace storytelling and creative writing as an instrument of cultural awareness?

DM Well, I think that when we tell stories we give experience a shape and I think those shapes are probably fairly fixed by psychology or by culture, so telling the story is a way of giving people access to a deeper understanding of things,

because they somehow intuitively recognize the shape of the story. That comes from the fact that our dreams themselves have shapes and those shapes are not ones that we impose on the dream, but rather they belong to some kind of repository of shapes that we use when we want to tell stories or we want to think in a certain kind of way. A story often has a logic that an argument would not have, and it appeals to people at a lower level than a logical argument, so perhaps if we have lost the capacity to communicate in one kind of way we have still kept it in another.

EG In *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* the unfamiliar setting in which the characters find themselves compels them to search for new myths and narratives; Michael Adair, for example, undergoes an almost mythical transformation in the legendary character O'Dare and in the Epilogue you describe both an intimate and a private transformation, similar in a way to those we find in Greek and Roman myths. In writing these passages did you feel you were forging a new Australian hero or giving Australia a new and more complex mythology?

DM The people who come to Australia bring old mythologies with them and that is a bit like the fact that they bring an old language with them. English, for example, is a language made for a different landscape, for a different climatic place, for a different topography, and they have to make that language fit in some way; they learn new words for the things that are there, words that other people who were there have for those things. When we call something a *billabong*, we are taking the Aboriginal word to describe a particular thing which elsewhere is called an oxbow lake. In the same way, stories and myths are just different modes of thinking, both symbolic and metaphorical. They would bring those myths and stories and try to find their echo or reflection in the new place; if they didn't find anything, they would have to either take it from Aboriginal people or make up new ones. It is difficult to say, as a writer, which you are doing.

In *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*, for example, I use some Christian symbolism, which is right for those characters because that's the way they think; in

the book, toward the end, for example, the notions of washing and baptism, the eating of the bread in the very last chapter, they all are Christian notions which you would expect to find in Adair, although he is sceptical, or in Carney, although he is kind of ignorant, or in the other people who are watching. Does that answer your question?

EG It most certainly does. Do you think this is what Australian Literature on the whole is about? A transposition of European values in a new setting?

DM It is more a translation than anything else, but I think writers are not very self-conscious of the fact they are creating new myths. I think they are more likely to do what people in other places are doing by recreating those myths for their time. Here people are recreating those myths, or stories or ways of thinking, not just for another time, but also for another place.

EG Myths are, in their essence, fluid and ever changing, they can present many variants and they allow the narrator of the story to rearrange and reshape it. Do you like to give your characters the chance to be looked upon from different perspectives? I am not referring solely to the characters from the Iliad in *Ransom* or Ovid in *An Imaginary Life* (1980), but I am also thinking about your original characters, for example in *The Prowler* we find this undefined, ever-changing figure.

DM If you are a writer you are aware of the various forms of literature that have already been produced. You are always aware that you are working with material that has already been used and is seen in one way, so you are always trying to find new ways of rewriting it.

This is very true of *An Imaginary Life*. I think that when I wrote that book I wasn't conscious of the fact that someone might be reading it outside Australia, that it would be seen as a use of the material that no European would make. I didn't realise when I was doing it that it might arise questions about the centre or the edge or even the notion that you might read it as postcolonial. I didn't realise,

as I was doing it, that those things might happen. Here, for example, that book was seen as basically in no way Australian and as having nothing to say to Australians that was specifically Australian, but as soon as it started getting reviews in France or Italy or Germany people said that no European would use this material in this way, only an Australian would be thinking like this. There are things that, as Australians, we take for granted and we don't realise they are unusual.

EG Do they become unusual later on?

DM They become unusual when someone points out the fact that they are unusual. And then sometimes, as in the case of that book, the book becomes to Australians an interesting book about Australia, as well as a book about Ovid.

EG So, when you were writing it what were you thinking about? What was your main concern?

DM The question of what happens to a poet when he has his language taken away from him. Ovid's exile is a double exile, exile to a place where he is surrounded by strangers and is outside the known world, but it's also an exile to a place where no one speaks his language and he effectively has no language. The question is: how much gets taken away from a poet if you take his language away from him as well as putting him in a place where all the experience of the place is also new?

EG What about silence? In *Ransom* you say that "Silence, not speech, was what was expressing. Power lay in containment" (Malouf 2009: 126) and still storytelling seems to be so important. Isn't this a contradiction?

DM Silence is not necessarily a negative thing, it's not necessarily only an absence of speech, it may also be a state, as in meditation or something like that, in which people are more in touch with something in themselves that doesn't belong to the world of articulation and speech. Silence in my works is always a positive thing, in

fact if people really go into silence they make a new experience of themselves. It is something beyond speech, which is both prior to speech and after speech.

EG Talking about dreams, as we were doing just a moment ago, in *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* you put an emphasis on dreams, which are described as a noble and terrible force. Dreams are present in many of your books and I would like to know if you were in any way inspired by the Aboriginal concept of the Dreamtime or if for you it is just a way of representing the unfathomable depths of the human mind.

DM I think it is not related to the Aboriginal Dreamtime at all. Dreams are clearly something very important; in the past people often thought dreams foretold the future, but after Freud we started to believe that dreams are another way of talking to ourselves about anxieties or problems or fears or aspirations. When you consider that we spend one third of our lives asleep and a lot of that time we are in some kind of way dreaming, you can see it is a huge amount of our experience. Dreams are important and I think dreams are always mysterious; we don't know what their message is and in interpreting them we are always on fairly risky ground. Nevertheless they belong to a process of our unconscious thinking and they are trying to tell something important.

EG Your references to ghosts are another thing I found truly interesting. Both in *Harland's Half Acre* and in *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* the ghost is a presence that is almost more real than its observer, to the point where the character asks himself 'Could it be that I am the ghost?' Is that a way to reflect on the fact that sometimes what we evoke with the power of our imagination is more real than 'real life'?

DM Yes, and I also think we are never quite certain, given that how we see things and what we see is dependant on the structure of our lives. We are never quite certain, from the time of Kant onwards, that there isn't some other reality there that our mind in its conscious form is not constructed to see. A lot of people feel

there is a reality they can see which others can't see and we have no idea of how much reality we are missing because our mind is not constructed to grasp it.

EG The act of naming and renaming seems to hold a great importance in *Fly Away Peter* (1985). The act of name-giving seems to be almost a reference to the Bible, when God gives Adam the right to name the creatures in the Garden. Do you feel a parallel can be drawn with what colonizers did when they settled in Australia, trying to shape the country by naming it?

DM Yes, there was a kind of Genesis here as well. I think that's really important, because naming puts an object into your consciousness so that it belongs to your world of speech and world of thinking. Naming is, in a way, possessing the object in a different way. That is certainly quite important in *Fly Away Peter*, but also in Australia inasmuch as all those birds and animals were not part of the speech or the consciousness that we brought to the place. We were strangers, the place was not ours, and so a lot of Australian writing, especially from the '30s and '40s and especially in poetry, is about creating a poetry and a form of language and a form of consciousness in Australia that includes all those things. Judith Wright writes a whole book on birds through which all those birds enter Australian poetry (1) and in entering Australian poetry they enter the consciousness of Australian readers, which means we begin to possess those creatures as we didn't before, so we are no longer strangers because they are now inside us. That's been a very, very important job that poetry in Australia took upon itself. Judith Wright especially, but other poets as well, for example David Campbell or Douglas Steward, made a project of creating a poetry which referred to all those things and took them into our lives. It was more than just a new language, it was a new consciousness, a consciousness in which those things were familiar; they were named and visible objects rather than unfamiliar ones.

EG A process of self-contextualisation?

DM Yes. In *Fly Away Peter* Jim is a kind of conduit through which all of those birds and the names of those birds come alive, not just in the land, but in the book that he is keeping. Ashley Crowter sees that as a way of coming into possession of all of those things.

EG This process seems to be very similar to that employed by the painter Frank Harland in *Harland's Half Acre*.

DM Exactly. When I wrote *Harland's Half Acre* the whole notion of possession, which becomes an important thing there, follows directly from *Fly Away Peter*.

EG In *Child's Play* (1982) you describe the process the author has to undergo to create "a new self" that "defies the expectations of his admirers" and the "notion he is already dead and done with". When you start writing a new book is this your aim? To provide the reader with something new and unexpected?

DM I don't really think of the reader very much. [laughs] I think of providing myself with something new and unexpected. If it's unexpected to me and it seems important to me then there are some readers out there who will find it to be unexpected and new.

EG Going back to our relationship with space and nature, in the very first paragraph of *Ransom* water images are converted to references to earth: "The man is a fighter, but when he is not fighting he is a farmer, earth is his element. One day he knows he will go back to it" (Malouf 2009: 4). This is not the only novel where a similar description can be found. I am thinking, for example, of *An Imaginary Life* and *Fly Away Peter*. Is this how you imagine death? As a dissolution of self in order to become part of a whole, of Nature and of the landscape?

DM That is very true when you consider *An Imaginary Life*, but it is also true in *Fly Away Peter* when characters begin to dig in order to get to the other side while they are really just entering the earth. What is really important in the first paragraph of *Ransom* is that Achilles is a very different kind of character; he has a different

kind of consciousness when compared to the other warriors. He has a very strong feminine side, which is associated with his mother; she is a Goddess rather than a mortal like his father and she is associated with the fluidity of water, as she is a water nymph. Here earth and water symbolise the contrast between what is stable and what is fluid.

EG Your first works are full of autobiographical references, *Johnno* especially. Do you feel you are becoming more detached from your personal experience?

DM When you first start writing the safest place for you is your own immediate experience, but it is also a very mysterious place. One of the reasons you are writing is that you are now looking at things in a different way; all the things you thought you understood and all the things that seemed boring. That's why you want to write. You either are utterly puzzled by your experience or realize that you never really understood some of the things you gave for granted or notice that some of the things that seemed familiar and boring are now in fact very exotic and mysterious. That early experience is very likely to be the place where a writer works first; I think that, after that, you find that you are still working with that early material, but you are disguising it much more.

I am very aware at the moment of *Harland's Half Acre*, because recently it has been reprinted and I have been working on it, that even if it is my fifth novel it uses all the family material, all my aunts and all my uncles and all the rest of it, but in disguises even they wouldn't realise. You mix it all up much more. As you go along you realise that your material is pretty much fixed, because the things that you are really interested in, or puzzled by, or where you have the stronger sensory response, or where your memory is most reliable, are things that probably belong to the first twenty years of your life. You just become much cleverer as a writer in using that material so that it looks different.

EG In an interview you stated that you think of your work as not being chronological but rather spatial, filling the space between *Johnno* and *An Imaginary Life*. Do you think this definition still applies after *Ransom*?

DM That's quite a good question. In some ways *Ransom* probably is my last piece of fiction, I haven't been writing any fiction recently, I'm writing poetry mostly. So perhaps *Ransom* is more like the final or the last book than *An Imaginary Life*. One of the things about that is that *An Imaginary Life* is written as if it were written by an old man, and I wasn't an old man when I wrote that book - certainly not as old a man as I was by the time I was writing *Ransom* - but I still think that what I sort of grasped when I moved from *Johnno* to *An Imaginary Life* was the full span across which my writing would work. So, to that extent, it is like the beginning and the ending and you are just filling the spaces in between.

When you have written two or three books you begin to see what it is you do. You always refer to that and when you have got an idea for a new book you make quite certain that the book belongs somewhere inside that body of work. What matters in the end is the way in which, in that body of work, your books all fit together and speak to one another.

EG Some sort of dialogical relationship?

DM Yes, dialogue, connections. Sometimes there is contrast, sometimes there is agreement, sometimes there is aversion, but somehow they all belong to the same consciousness and the some body of writings.

EG What about your future projects?

DM As I said, I am writing mostly poetry. I think that when you get to a certain age as a fiction writer - I think you might see this in other people's writing as well - you don't have the patience that you had when you were younger. So, if you are not very careful, you end up writing books that are too thin, that do not have the

same kind of density or solidity. I think I don't want to write that kind of books or even stories.

EG What about drama?

DM The thing about theatre is that you are always working in collaboration, and that might be liberating in some ways, as you are not responsible for everything, but I think writers, especially novelists, want to have the control of everything.

I was also a bit shocked by the fact that every night, when I went to the play, it was like watching a different play. The audience was different, they were laughing in different places or the actors would do different things, so there is nothing stable there. You have very little control. Playwrights find it very exciting, but when you have spent most of your life working on sentences in order to manipulate and control as far as you can the response of the reader you get very jumpy when you are surrounded by people who are not following [laughs]. I really like writing librettos and I get very excited at the idea that the music is going to make it sound all different; I want to see that, I want to hear that.

NOTES

1. Here Malouf is referring to the collection *Birds* by Judith Wright.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Malouf, David. 1975. *Johnno*. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press.

Malouf, David. 1980. *An Imaginary Life*. Woollhara: Picador Pan Books.

Malouf, David. 1982. *Child's Play*. London: Chatto & Windus.

Malouf, David. 1982. *Fly Away Peter*. London: Chatto & Windus.

Malouf, David. 1984. *Harland's Half Acre*. London: Chatto & Windus.

Malouf, David. 1991. Opera, the most contemporary art. *Australian Book Review* 11, 1991, 25-29.

Malouf, David. 1993. *Remembering Babylon*. London: Chatto & Windus.

Malouf, David. 1996. *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*. Toronto: Alfred Knopf.

Malouf, David. 2009. *Ransom*. Sydney: Knopf/Random: House.

Panikkar, Raimond. 2009. *The Rhythm of Being*. New York: Orbis Books.

Wright, Judith. 1960. *Birds*. Sydney: Angus & Robinson.

Eleonora Goi is completing a PhD on the use of myth in David Malouf's fiction at the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, University of Udine. Her research focuses on Australian postcolonial Literature and 19th–20th century English Literature. She is a member of the James Joyce Italian Foundation and was visiting fellow at the University of Queensland, Brisbane in 2013.

goi.eleonora@gmail.com